



Publishing Is . . .

by George Garrett

"Publishing is something I sort of drifted into."

— Gary Fisketjon

In a world, ours, in which large and small atrocities are our daily fare and to which atrocities we often seem to have become so ruthlessly accustomed as to have surrendered our ability to raise our eyebrows or to perform any moral gesture whatsoever above and beyond the habitual shrug (grinning or weeping, no matter) of late 20th-century mankind, it may seem mostly unimportant, if not wholly irrelevant, to waste time and space and energy on the subject of (yet again) the faulty ways and means of American publishing. After all, at its best and finest, publishing is only a marginally profitable enterprise; as a business it cannot be taken very seriously. And at its worst, it is a home not (anymore) for colorful pirates or dangerous villains, but, alas, for all-too-common and familiar knaves and fools of the kind who can be found everywhere in abundance in every sort of vocation as this bloody, weary century dances in spastic jerks towards its sure and certain demise.

Yet we believe, as we have to, that books are important. All the more so in a nation that professes to be free and hopes to remain so, all of our leaders and institutions being united in consensual approbation of the free and easy flow of and access to ideas, and images as well; professing a consensual belief in this ideal in spite of, indeed in the face

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of actions of all kinds from all sides to prevent all but the simplest or most frivolous of ideas (all but the most stereotypical of images) from being tested in the fire of serious, sustained debate and discussion. With some notable exceptions (the pure documentary films of Frederick Wiseman, for a rare example), television has turned into not a wasteland so much as a theme park devoted to simple problems and simplistic solutions, with an attendant graveyard for any unfamiliar or unpopular notion that might require more than a minute for elucidation. Can't we (finally!) agree on that much and be done with the subject? Television offers a certain amount of crude entertainment, mind-cleansing if seldom mind-blowing, but is, by definition and design, unable to deal with even the rudiments of thought, let alone the dance of ideas. In the world of television Bill Moyers is a sage. Enough said. Except that this central and incurable vacuity, one that automatically includes illiteracy in a rich variety of forms, has made our books, such as they are, and, of course, the people who make and publish these books, more important than anyone could have earlier imagined. Maybe too important. People, including judges, legislators, and senior executives, act on the basis of things they have read. In spite of the clamor and consequent laughter and forgetting, some may still remember that in the "debate" between Quayle and Bentsen both candidates were asked by reporters, and asked as if it were a

smirky trick question, to name a couple of books they had read in times within recent memory. It was an oddly tense moment or two for partisans of both sides; for nobody could be sure that either of these two office-seekers had indeed read anything or, anyway, could remember the experience of reading anything and summon up titles and maybe authors to go with the experience. Surprisingly, both recalled reading some fairly recent books, works of uneven value to be sure; but the question and answers interested nobody.

We may be approaching that level of illiteracy in which the book, itself, becomes a thing of magic, and those who write, publish, and actually read books can be identified as magicians.

So many of the basic, simple things about American book publishing have been said and said again (shelves of books on the general topic, stacks of magazines begging to be sent to the nearest incinerator or, if you insist, to the nearest recycling center), that one is forced to assume the expression and stance of the prophet in the Richard Wilbur poem, appearing “mad-eyed from stating the obvious.” And yet there are some things that bear repeating. One of these is most obvious, and therefore least often said: that American publishing is, bag and baggage, heart and soul, an entity more involved than disengaged from the fabric of American society and the world of American business. It is true that most publishers, like professors of the humanities, like to pretend, as much to themselves as to anyone else, that they are somehow separate from and superior to the mainstream of American society and culture. Because publishing is not a very good nor a very efficient business and because publishers do not make as much profit as the purveyors of other, often humbler products, they like to imagine themselves as dedicated individuals who have somehow or other transcended all crude self-interest and are now performing a kind of sacrificial public service, one without which the intellectual vital signs of the whole culture would wither, shrivel, and disappear. They tend to be inordinately proud of their amateur status. It is only when facing each other, in concentric rings like the gravestones of the celebrated Sedgwick family surrounding the imposing tomb of their founding father, in this case the tomb of somebody like, say, the late Alfred Knopf, that they will show the bright grin the shark reserves for greeting its prey. They are not really a lovable bunch, except to themselves; and you come away from examining all the books about them, their lives and their works and days, with the very strong suspicion that even the best and brightest among them are sincerely second-rate. Without being cynical or sour it is quite easy to arrive at the proposition that if the best you can come up with as exemplary figures are the likes of Cerf or Knopf or Horace Liveright, if these are the giants of the industry, then the industry must be and have always been a kind of reservation for pygmies.

Consider the editors, then, you will argue. Ironically, I answer, the finest times (such as they were) for editors of excellence, for the likes of Maxwell Perkins and Saxe Commins and Albert Erskine and Hiram Hayden, were precisely the same times when editors had least to do with the business and commerce of publishing. They acquired

and edited books. Most of today’s successful editors make deals; they make book, not books. One of the most widely publicized of the new breed, Gary Fisketjon, now editorial director of the Atlantic Monthly Press, is quoted in a brand new book (*Reasons to Believe: New Voices in American Fiction*) as having this to say about the ways of his predecessors: “I find this whole Maxwell Perkins line of thinking sophomoric.” Several other editors are singled out for special praise in *Reasons to Believe*—Seymour Lawrence, Gordon Lish (“In the world of contemporary fiction, Gordon Lish is a true Renaissance man”), and Tom Jenks. Oddly missing is the equally public and perhaps more influential Ted Solotaroff, whose highly personal *A Few Good Voices in My Head* (1987) has much to tell, and more to demonstrate, about the ways American publishing has developed and changed. It should be briefly noted that three of these—Jenks, Lish, and Solotaroff—consider themselves to be fiction writers as well. In any case, however, you wouldn’t yet put any of these names in a list that included the honored and honorable editors of the past, would you? Seriously?

What I am saying here is, yes, that as a business American publishing doesn’t amount to much and that therefore the people who make up American publishing don’t amount to a whole lot, either, and probably never did, even though the previous generation is beginning to look better every day. With the exception of some rich kids who couldn’t think of anything better or easier to do with themselves, most people in American publishing are eagerly upwardly-mobile types, clawing for whatever honor and status they can claim and get. This, of course, makes them at once predictable and unreliable. Predictably unreliable, then. Ideally suited to be middlemen in an enterprise that lives more and more on the fumes of borrowed money that it shares in moderation with its writers in the form of advances against future royalties, if any.

The most intelligent and thorough general accounting of recent directions in American publishing is the final chapter, “What Has Happened to Publishing,” in the Solotaroff book. His enemy in that piece is the “corporate mentality,” more and more felt in editorial offices as publishing houses are acquired in mergers by larger corporations, an increasingly multinational phenomenon. This can make it tough on editors who have to live and act, Solotaroff indicates, by the vaguest of guidelines: “Because each book is different, or at least used to be, publishing is full of contingencies and guesswork; hence, in uncertain circumstances it pays to know who you are and what you do well.” (Try *that* on for size in the corporate accounting office.) What Solotaroff describes as the main lines of development in publishing during his career is, in addition to the corporate concentration, an increasing centralization of publishing in New York City and a gradual change in the social class and ethnic background of publishers and editors. Just as the academic world became less and less dominated by downwardly-mobile, genteel WASP professors, so publishing witnessed more and more “examples of Jewish newcomers using family money to establish houses that conformed to their desire and drive to play an important cultural role in New York, much as their counterparts were

doing in Vienna, Berlin, and London” (as Solotaroff writes). The elements of that “desire and drive,” like so many in publishing, are essentially paradoxical.

On the one hand there is a need to shrink the American experience and audience to the most manageable, local limits—“an important cultural role in New York.” On the other, there is a sense of internationalism, of a very much larger world, linked by some common interests and the power of great cities, more or less without regard to the countryside (nations) surrounding and supporting them. Needless to say, the predominant point of view presented by American publishing houses is moderately, safely leftist, aggressively urban, and largely indifferent to most of the mainstream political, social, religious, and regional concerns of the country. Thus the relation of publisher to national audience becomes a model of old-fashioned colonialism, of Ancient empire. Those at the imperial center of things need not concern themselves deeply with the wishes and hopes of their audience, the far-flung others, that wider world from Disney World to Disneyland, unless and until there were to be some sort of significant revolt against the cultural imperialism of New York, a revolt, alas, seemingly unlikely because it is one of the sad goals of this particular audience, the audience for American “high” art and culture, to be thought to be deftly in touch with the latest trends and movements coming from the Big City. Thus, for instance, American regional theater, despite the talent of its artists and the support of its audiences, remains doggedly bush league, depending almost completely on New York for identity and certification.



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Much the same attitude applies to the more complex world of books. Since almost all the topics of nonfiction books are in fact invented in New York publishing offices, it follows that most of the nonfiction we finally get in the provinces is less exemplary of what we might want or need than it is what they think we should receive and read. In nonfiction, then, our choices are somewhat limited, more apt to be more purely *regional*, that region being New York City, in political, social, cultural assumptions, than to reflect the wider and deeper national concerns. Vietnam is a case in point. Will we ever be permitted to read a reasonably “objective” account of that war, those times? Not likely. So much for the free-flowing currency of ideas.


With “images,” the presented worlds of fiction and poetry, the situation is somewhat different. With the exceptions of certain best-sellers, none of these things are especially profitable to anybody. Nobody really tries to *lose* money on these ventures in literature (except, occasionally, for tax scams); but their expectations are exceedingly modest. What follows is that, in terms of literary fiction and poetry, the forces of the marketplace (thus ultimately of the hopes and wishes of readers) are not especially influential. Publishers are more like high-placed, old-fashioned patrons

(albeit with somebody else’s money) than midwives to these arts. It becomes more and more a matter of *personal* selection of materials and support on the part of editors who exercise their power (which is real, since it has so few limits) more out of strictly subjective criteria and self-interest than out of any serious standards of value or even of good taste. As Seymour Lawrence says (in *Reasons to Believe*): “People often ask me how I choose the authors, and I’ll say that it’s very hard to explain. Often I don’t explain it. I’ll say that it’s an intuitive thing.” Not exactly the words of a born salesman. Somewhat more combative is the position of Gordon Lish, as described in *Reasons to Believe*—“Lish couldn’t care less whether he is loved or hated, as long as he can act as a catalyst in the development of important artists.” For those who might be mildly skeptical, there is the demonstrably judicious integrity of Tom Jenks. “I can’t imagine that there is any neglected contemporary fiction at this point,” he writes. “I don’t think there’s a lot that slips through the cracks.” The claim is, then, that (boy scout’s honor) our publishers are giving us the best and most representative material that comes in to them. Whether you choose to believe that or not will depend on the extent of your experience of placing your trust and faith in the hands of others. To at least some among us, it seems that many of the new generation of editors are asking for the kind of respect usually afforded only to physicians, and specialists at that. The significance of the predominantly *personal* approach to the publication of fiction and poetry is that these editors, first of all, are concerned with shaping the careers of writers they like socially as well as professionally. Networking (as they say) is inevitable. Also inevitable, in a business based on personal commitments, is the doubly emphatic need to *maintain the status quo* they have established. Thus what should be an age of discovery becomes, in fact, a time of stasis, of the wagon train tightly circled against the yowling of nameless savages on the outside.

But there are some forces working against the firm trends of contemporary American publishing. Some are internal. The very size of the big New York publishers makes them wildly unwieldy and inefficient, and burdens them, and their books, with an implausible weight of exorbitant overhead. At their size it is harder and harder to turn a profit with anything even slightly more demanding than the works of Bill Cosby or the meditations of Michael Jackson. Smaller publishers can afford to take more chances and to locate themselves anywhere in America. Thanks to all that and, as well, to the latest technology, we seem to be poised at the edge of a return to regional publishing in America for the first time since the Civil War. Whatever else, regional publishers will be closer to their actual market and thus to the free flow of ideas and images. For the two are intimately related. Meantime university presses, and small presses generally, are coming forward with some of the most interesting and valuable books being published today in America. Some measure of their success (and threat to the present literary establishment) is to be found in the fact that the highly politicized National Endowment for the Arts has cut its modest support of many of these presses in order to consolidate the bulk of its money behind a few strictly

minority, ethnic, and special-interest presses, ones that otherwise, lacking any solid base of marketplace support, might not survive. Nothing new in this kind of social engineering and fine-tuning. But the real problem of government support and nonsupport of the arts is more knotty and gnarled. Perhaps fortunately, it as yet remains beyond the power of government to do much more than to meddle with the arts. It seems to be, as yet, impossible for government to work much aesthetic harm or good.

In a smaller sense there are always good reasons to consider American publishing, to expose its assumptions and to challenge its assertions and conclusions. In the small and beleaguered world of the study of literature, it is impossible to begin to understand the arts of any age, including our own shabby one, without understanding also, at least in general terms, the means of production and, as well, the motives of the producers, the sharecropper writers

as well as the shell-game publishers. For many reasons the successful literary scholars of our age have spent next to no time examining the publishing business and how and to what extent it has shaped the literature of the age. Publishers have been more or less immune to the kind of scrutiny habitually faced by producers and distributors of other products. Like the Press, with which they have a certain kinship, publishers have been spared much for the sake of the free flow of information and ideas. That this desired goal has not been achieved (yet) goes without saying. That the toxic waste of outworn ideas and limited intellectual systems (Marxism, for a blatant example) is relentlessly preserved by the habits and assumptions of American publishers, who wish to educate if not convert us even as we pay our money and take such choices they allow us, ought to give us pause, even as we must turn away towards more pressing and urgent problems. 

LIBERAL ARTS

PULP READING COMP. FOR THE SAT

The following passage is an excerpt from the mass-market novel *Hot Flashes* by Barbara Raskin. Please read it carefully and answer the questions below.

Judy (who didn't marry until she was thirty-seven when she fell head over heels in love with Michael O'Leary, the writer-in-residence at BU where she taught) had been married only two years when Mike ran off with his previous wife's youngest daughter—a girl named Ginger—who came to stay with Judy and Mike while visiting colleges in the Boston area. Since Mike had only done the right “extended formerly-blended family” thing by accommodating his previous wife and allowing Ginger—who had been his stepdaughter for three years, five years earlier—to stay in his new home with his new wife, no one knew whom to blame. At least Ginger's mother had the decency to call Judy to apologize profusely and even suggested that if they worked together, they might successfully uncouple that unnatural couple—a suggestion that Judy politely declined despite the distraught mother's hysteria about her daughter not going to college.

1) Which is the best title for this passage?

- a) “A Girl Named Ginger”
- b) “Smart Women—Foolish Choices”
- c) “Blame It On Boston”
- d) “Canada—Our Friendly Neighbor to the North”
- e) “These Tangled Eighties”

2) The mood created by the author is one of

- a) confusion
- b) puzzlement
- c) uncertainty
- d) bewilderment
- e) perplexity

3) What is the main idea expressed by the author?

- a) That old people shouldn't get married
- b) That Judy's mom and Ginger's mom are friends
- c) That Mike is a writer
- d) That both Judy and Ginger have been victimized, not only by Mike, but by a society that prizes beauty and youth above all other qualities—including a Boston University education
- e) I don't know

4) “That unnatural couple” (line 12) refers to

- a) Mike and Ginger
- b) Ginger and Judy
- c) Mike, Judy, and Ginger
- d) Ginger, Judy, Mike, and Scraps, Judy's dog from a previous marriage
- e) the author and her publisher

5) Judging from the passage, the reader can conclude that

- a) Almost anything is better than going to college in Boston
- b) Judy is a head-case from way back

- c) After reading this passage in the book, you would have to flip back to this page several times before finally remembering which is Judy and which is Ginger
- d) Mike and Ginger will soon be appearing on *Geraldo*
- e) I don't know

6) Which would best describe the relationship between Mike and Ginger?

- a) Father-Daughter
- b) “Uncle-Niece”
- c) Kissing Cousins
- d) Just good friends
- e) Soulmates

7) All of the following are blurbs for the novel EXCEPT

- a) “Filled with laughter, tears, love, and hate . . . like life itself!”
- b) “Funny, sad, perceptive, and outrageous . . . *Hot Flashes* sizzles!”
- c) Barbara Raskin is one funny lady . . . I laughed until I cried, and laughed some more!”
- d) “Touching, bawdy, and so true it hurts . . . *Hot Flashes* delivers the goods—and how!”
- e) “A megawatt express train of daredevil action!”

—by Chris Marcil and Sam Johnson.
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